

Title: Religious Leaders from Mali, Ghana, Senegal, Mauritania and Uganda Meet to Discuss Family Planning and Reproductive Health

Date: January 24-26, 2006

Department: Health

Description: The USAID Mali Health Team

Content:

With the support of the POLICY Project II, religious leaders from Mali, Ghana, Senegal, Mauritania and Uganda met to talk about family planning and reproductive health. The meeting, which brought together influential Islamic leaders, local religious leaders, social organizations and representatives of Islamic communities of these **five** countries, culminated in the participants' actively supporting the idea that reproductive health and family planning are not incompatible with Islamic ideology. Based on the POLICY project's work with religious and government leaders in Mali and Uganda, and on the enthusiastic outcome of the *First Conference of African Islamic Faith Based Organizations*, held in Abuja, Nigeria in March of 2005, the POLICY project organized this regional workshop in January of 2006 in Bamako, Mali. The main theme of the workshop was the "Repositioning of Family Planning in Africa". The concept of "repositioning" entails bringing family planning back to a higher level of visibility and importance. The forum gave religious leaders and scholars an opportunity to discuss best practices, identify challenges (educational, social, cultural and political), and reinforce each others' efforts to engage members of their respective religious institutions in promoting family planning and reproductive health. The workshop included sessions on an analysis of Koranic references to reproductive health and family planning, the role of religious leaders in these sectors, the promotion of birth spacing, the controversial issue of diversion of attention and funding to HIV/AIDS, and the importance of family planning and reproductive health in a national HIV/AIDS strategy.

The workshop also addressed the importance of establishing a regular dialog between Islamic and Christian religious leaders, and the need for the more educated religious leaders to play the role of "champions" in the promotion of family planning initiatives. Capacity building for religious leaders to enable them to provide advocacy and lead the dialog on the issues was also identified as a priority. Advocacy strategies were discussed, such as the use of economic and scientific data to support birth spacing, Koranic references to family planning, and the impact of high fertility rates. As one participant put it, "Advocacy for religious leaders means seeking change in policies within the Muslim community as well as in the government and other sectors. For example, in the case of early marriages that lead to high fertility rates, premature childbearing and problems such as obstetric fistula, professionals and technicians can educate and inform the population to try and reduce such problems but religious leaders can advocate for imams to stop blessing early marriages. Religious leaders must not only advocate, they must take action."

Geographic areas: Mali, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal and Uganda

Keywords: Family Planning; Religious Leaders; POLICY Project II; HIV/AIDS; Reproductive Health; Repositioning

Pictures:



Islamic leaders discussing family planning and reproductive health



Islamic women leaders participate in discussions on family planning and reproductive health